



2-3-2006

Scroggins, Renee

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Transcriber: Laura Kelly

Andrew Tiedt (AT): First I thought I'd like you to talk a little bit about your early experiences. Like, for example, could you just tell us where you grew up and maybe what street you lived on.

Renee Scroggins (RS): We lived in the Moore Projects. This is on Jackson Avenue, 149th Street.

AT: Jackson and 149th?

RS: Yes.

AT: Okay, when you - - what do you remember the neighborhood being like when you were a child?

RS: When we first moved into the projects they were nice and clean, they were brand new projects, okay. But it didn't take long, I would say a couple of years before they started to deteriorate and go down. I think when people moved in the projects, they begin to group together, gang together. And plus at this particular time, this was a drug era I would say, okay. So there were a lot of bad things going on in the projects and stuff. I don't like the projects then; I don't like the projects now, okay. But I understand - - because again, like our situation, when people have poor economic situations, this is where you wind up.

AT: And when you were at this age did you notice this, did you notice the presence of drugs? I mean, was it really obvious?

RS: Well, not when I was - - again when I was - - at first when we moved in the projects I was about 4 years old. So as a kid you really don't notice these kind of things at first. I

was like, again, as I got to be 10, 11 years old that I started to notice these things. Like it pretty much took a couple of years before it really started to deteriorate.

AT: Right, right. So where did you - - where were you attending school?

RS: Actually, that's a pretty funny story. We didn't go to school in the neighborhood.

My father, for some reason, wanted us to go to school on Morris Avenue.

AT: On Morris Avenue?

RS: Yeah. We all went to PS 35.

AT: Alright, yeah, PS 35. And how was PS 35, how was your experience there? Do you have any teachers that you remember?

RS: Sure. I remember Mr., well, okay, oh my god - - first I remember a teacher called Ms. Ivelin. And that was in second grade. And she was real cool and real supportive. And then I remember a teacher called Mr. Feidler. He actually introduced me to different types of cultural music.

AT: Really?

RS: Yeah. He introduced us to Irish Folk Music [laughs].

AT: Wow.

RS: Yeah, it was really cool. I still remember those songs believe it or not [laughs].

AT: Yeah, I can believe it. I think that we all have those music experiences or experiences with music and band and those things we're young and it sticks with you right?

RS: Yeah. So, Irish folk music, Jewish folk music, different cultural music and stuff like that you know, compared to I guess what we were used to at home.

AT: And what was his name again? He was - -

RS: Mr. Feidler.

AT: Feidler, okay. And why was it that he knew so much about Irish and Jewish music. Was this like his specialty?

RS: No, I mean, I can't say. It was different things like he would do in the class when we had extra time when we weren't learning. He would read us The Odyssey. He would, you know, different things. And I guess he was just trying to open up inner city kids to different experiences.

AT: Yeah, that sounds really great. So when did you actually start playing music?

RS: Well pretty much at about this time, okay [laughs]. At about 9,10 years old.

AT: So about 9 and 10, so it was really elementary school?

RS: Mmm, hmm.

AT: And I remember we had mentioned this before, but you said that you did play in was it the orchestra?

RS: That was in junior high school.

AT: Oh, that was junior high?

RS: Yeah.

AT: Okay.

RS: So when I got to sixth grade [laughs] I learned and studied the violin. And, okay, I'm trying to remember that teacher's name. Oh god, hopefully it will ring a bell in a moment there but - -

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AT: Okay, we'll get back to you later there. So you started on the violin, right, that was your - -

RS: Uh huh.

AT: - - and why did you pick the violin?

RS: I didn't pick the violin, the violin picked me [laughs].

AT: [laughs] Did they tell you to play the violin?

RS: Yes, you either had - - they would either put you in the orchestra or the band - -

AT: Right, right, I remember that.

RS: - - which you would either be with strings or brass instruments, woodwinds [laughs].

AT: It's an interesting choice considering what you ended up doing, I think, you know [laughs] that you weren't into something that was more heavy and percussive.

RS: No.

AT: So the violin. And how long were you actually in the orchestra? Was it all the way through school?

RS: No. Well that's a funny story because I went from the sixth grade to the eighth grade so - - two years.

AT: Alright. So you decided that - - what made you decide to leave the orchestra?

RS: I graduated [laughs].

AT: Oh, you just left the school, okay.

RS: Yeah I went to high school.

AT: And this is PS 35 that you left?

RS: No, now that's Junior High School 145.

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AT: Okay so we went from PS 35 to Junior High School 45. And where did you attend high school?

RS: Oh god, now high school. I'm not even gonna talk about high school, okay. Because high school, I guess for a majority of kids is not a pleasant memory. It wasn't a pleasant memory for me. So I refuse to talk about my high school. But yeah, I attended high school in the Bronx.

AT: Okay, so then you went on to high school and you didn't, you weren't playing the violin anymore.

RS: No, but I sang in the chorus for a bit.

AT: Oh, okay.

RS: I liked that.

AT: Yeah. What got you started on the chorus?

RS: [laughs] It was another class. You know, it was one of those things. You go to your guidance counselor, and they go 'Well we got this class and this class, and you have like an open option and what do you want to do?' And I said, 'Oh okay, chorus.'

AT: Yeah, yeah. And was this something that your friends were also doing?

RS: Pretty much so. So you know, you're in high school, you got a couple of buddies and they're like, 'Okay we're gonna take chorus,' and you go 'That's cool, that's cool.' But again, I always enjoyed music. I always enjoyed chorus because even when I was a kid in church I sang in the choir and stuff like that. So you know, you enjoy music and you know...

AT: Yeah, so naturally you probably would have friends that would be in music also.

Now, so you went from playing the violin in orchestra and singing in the chorus to actually, you know, putting a band together at some point. So who do you think was the person in your life that was most instrumental in getting you to play?

RS: My mother - -

AT: Your mother.

RS: My mother Helen Scroggins, yes.

AT: Helen Scroggins. Okay. And what was it that she did that really - - did she kind of push you or did she just encourage your interests?

RS: She encouraged us. What it was was, again, the neighborhood was deteriorating. She started seeing things going bad with kids that were hanging out. Kids around our age were getting into things and stuff like that and she didn't want that. But again, we were sitting at home and we were watching Don Kershner rock concert and [laughs] and we were watching - - they had a show on PBS called soul, and we were seeing these different artists and we said 'We can do that ma.' And surely would say, 'Ma, I can do that, I can do that.' And she was like, 'Yeah, okay.' I mean I personally don't think at first she really believed it but it was a pacifier.

AT: Right, right. But it was definitely something that was probably good for you. It gave you something constructive to do.

RS: Exactly.

AT: So how did you - - where did you get your first instruments, what were they exactly? What were the instruments that you were all playing?

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RS: Okay, well, there was one Christmas and mom, she delivered you know all the instruments I asked for [laughs]. Okay, she got a drum set - -

AT: Alright, that's a good place to start, right? I'm speaking from a biased perspective [laughs].

RS: [laughs] - - well she had a drum set, okay? And she gave that to my sister Valerie because Valerie was always beating on oatmeal boxes and pots so [laughs], so my mother gave her the drum set okay. And it was funny, she gave me a bass guitar and she gave me an electric guitar and also she gave me a tambourine.

AT: Okay.

RS: Okay? So I was like whoa you know.

AT: Is that because you were more naturally the singer? It sounds like Valerie - - it was obvious that she was a drummer, she was beating on things.

RS: Right.

AT: So is that why you ended up with the guitar and the bass?

RS: And the tambourine [laughs].

AT: Or is that what you asked for? Is that what you wanted?

RS: Well I wanted the guitar and the bass because at this point in time I wasn't too sure what I wanted to play or whatever have so I was gonna try working on them both. Which I did learn to play them both. And the tambourine - - it was just something that you wanted because you would see the sisters in the church rocking one so you wanted one too [laughs].

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AT: Sounds great actually. Sounds like a good - - the best place to start right? Just pick up the instruments and start playing. So - -

RS: Well, you'd try, you would [inaudible].

AT: Well this heading now. I'm wondering how did you - - well, okay, you had - - when you first started playing were you just playing with Valerie? Did you - - was your original set up similar to the setup you had a few years later?

RS: Well at first it was just Valerie and I but see then I realized I couldn't play both guitar and bass at the same time so I had a younger sister and I had to decide which instrument I was going to allow her to play. And when I say allow her to play, I would show her what I wanted her to play and then she would perform it live.

AT: Okay, and this was Marie?

RS: No, this was not Marie. This was actually Deborah.

AT: Oh okay, I'm sorry. I'm getting the names confused here. So the three of you were the initial band, and what kinds of music - - what kinds of songs were you playing, covers, or did you just start playing your own stuff?

RS: We would play covers when we first started playing we would play covers. We attempted the Rolling Stones' "Satisfaction." We attempted Chaka Khan and Rufus' "Once You Get Started." Lets see, oh god, what else did we attempt. Oh my goodness [laughs], I mean we - -

AT: Now you say you attempted, you attempted - -

RS: - - [laughs] we attempted because again it was a fair, very fair [laughs] cover of the song. So again we were like, 'Man, this is not sounding like the record,' [laughs] you

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know? And whatever have you so like, 'Man, this is not cool.' And see we would have - - every Friday we would have what a call a music review. And we would come up to show my mother what we learned or what we'd been practicing that whole week. It was really funny. She would make sure that we were practicing [laughs] when she wasn't home from work [laughs].

AT: Oh, okay. Yeah, I was wondering who your critics were. So how did your - - you're practicing in your apartment - -

RS: Yeah.

AT: - - and how did your neighbors feel about that?

RS: Well I mean it was really funny and it was something again that I will always appreciate. I mean I guess they understood because again, we were making a lot of noise and that was the best term - - a lot of noise and stuff like that. But I guess they appreciate the fact that again, these kids weren't hanging out in the street and whatever have you. I mean one of the funniest things I always remember, right, was the lady said, 'Listen, I don't mind your making all that racket' right? But she said, 'Just please, after my soap opera. It goes off at 3...' I'm serious now [laughs] '...it goes off at three o'clock. After that, you know, go for it.' [laughs]

AT: Alright, so you had the support of the people around you as long as you didn't cut into their private time.

RS: [laughs] Yeah, their soap operas.

AT: Exactly, the important things.

RS: [laughs] Well...

AT: So you'd practice like maybe - - well whenever? Or did you have a structure like one day a week, two days a week?

RS: No, every day.

AT: Every day.

RS: Every day. So, I mean I guess the only thing that was off was the weekends because that's when my mother was home[laughs]. That's when she was home from work. So from Monday to Friday. Naturally, again, after school, as soon as we got in. So I would say pretty much, we would work from 4 o'clock to 6:30, every day. In the summer, okay, in the summer, I mean we would get up in the morning but we couldn't wait. And we knew again the neighbors and things like that so we respected - - but then we were rolling from 3 o'clock to 6:30.

AT: So you were conscious of that. It sounds like you put in a lot of practice time.

RS: We did so that's how we got better real quick because we did do it every day. We were dedicated.

AT: So when - - this was all going on, but when was your first gig and what was your sound when you played that first gig?

RS: Okay, well, first thing let's move on to when we decided to drop covers. Now one day we realized, 'Hey we don't sound like these people. But again, we don't wanna sound like these people.' Also, as things went along we would pick up little instruments from the side stores because you would walk by and you would see in various - - like in our neighborhood - - not directly in our neighborhood, but whether it be Third Avenue or

Prospect Avenue or off Southern Boulevard where there were a lot of stores. There were a lot Latin stores.

AT: Right, right.

RS: So we would see instruments like Maracas and, I never pronounce this correct but it's like a little shaving instrument type of thing. I never pronounce the name right. I'm not going to attempt it and embarrass myself.

AT: That's okay. But like auxiliary percussion, all of these - -

RS: Right, and then little bongos and of course the large congas and stuff like that. So what we did, we would get them piece by piece.

AT: And little by little. And it was accessible, there were instruments in the neighborhood, people were - - and this is - - so do you think that the Latin music affected your style?

RS: Sure. And another thing, we lived in the projects. There was, behind us, there was a park-St. Mary's Park [laughs]. And every summer in St. Mary's Park, because again, we didn't have air conditioning and we had screens in the window [laughs] okay? So the wind is blowing and you would always here Latin gentleman in the park with some Coke bottles, a cow bell, and a set of congas playing the same thing- 'boom, boom, boom, ta, ta ta, boom, boom, boom- [laughs] you know, and it was the summer sound. Plus they were singing. Again, I don't know what they were singing, but they were rolling there.

AT: So you couldn't help but be influenced by it. It was all around you.

RS: You would go to sleep by it, okay. Now [laughs] I'm serious. And again, you know, some people, again, be it one or two o'clock in the morning, you still hearing this roll,

you know. I mean eggs started going out the window [laughs]. Not from my window per se. But then you got the sounds of the people in the streets. They weren't polite sounds either.

AT: They were just music critics right?

RS: With colorful phrases, I might add. It's all funny because even that, the back and forth with them arguing and stuff, this was even very musical, okay. And then when it got too colorful my mother would say, 'Close your window in there.' [laughs] Like that was gonna stop it, these people were loud, you were hearing these sounds.

AT: I can imagine.

RS: I mean from the people in the building arguing with the people downstairs, it turned into a loud argument.

AT: But at least they were arguing over something important like music right?

RS: Yeah well they were arguing that the music was going on until one or two o'clock in the morning, they don't know what they were doing, but they had to go to work in the morning [laughs]. So little things you remember.

AT: So this is about - - you at this point, you said we're kind of moving up to your performances, and your sister's performances. Could you tell me a little about that? Like where you played first and how you started playing.

RS: Well, we did a lot of talent shows at first. I mean, well, now let me say that my mother said - - like I said, she would review us every week. You know, my sister Valerie and I would write these songs. We started playing these songs, and we would play them better and better and better. Then when they got real good one day my mother said,

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‘You’re ready, how about we enter some kind of talent contest?’ And we were like, ‘Talent contest?’ I don’t know what we were thinking but now it was time to actually go out and have yourself reviewed [laughs]. So she entered us in some talent contests. And again they had local contests, the Bronx contest, different things, I couldn’t give you the exact addresses and stuff like that. But they even had some for New York City housing, where we were living in, okay so we played - -

AT: So they were neighborhood contests?

RS: - - -yeah, so we played those too and stuff like that. And some we won, some we didn’t.

AT: What were the other acts? I mean, what kind of music would you hear at these contests?

RS: Well, it was funny. There was no live music. Really, there wasn’t. But what there was, was a lot of kids were [laughs] were pretty much singing to the music. I’m not saying lip syncing, they weren’t singing over it. They were singing with it or - - in the day, there would always be the instrumental side of a record. Now it’s dangerous to do that because if you make an instrumental side, it’s being sampled [laughs].

AT: Exactly.

RS: But back in the day, there were instrumental sides to the record. So they would have the side where the artists were singing and then they would have the side on the back which was instrumental, so I guess you could do your own interpretation of the song.

AT: Right, like the dub side basically - -

RS: Yeah. Right. So what it was was you know, those kids were using that or they were doing some sort of dance or something so this was pretty much the competition and stuff like that. Rarely - - maybe somebody played the folk guitar. So this was pretty much it. So we did well and we advanced far and stuff like that. It was always like, 'Oh man, girls are playing?' I remember that and stuffed like that.

AT: So people were always impressed to see you get up on stage, like three - - at this point were you just the three women or was - -

RS: Uh, huh.

AT: When did Leroy Glover become part of your - -

RS: Now he became part when I took my sister Deborah out.

AT: Oh, okay so that was - -

RS: Yeah, that was in 1985.

AT: That was much later then, okay.

RS: Yes.

AT: So we're not even into that at all yet.

RS: No we're still [laughs] before '79.

AT: Okay so you were doing these things and you won a few contests.

RS: Right.

AT: So at what point - - was there a point where you realized you really wanted to do this on a bigger stage or that you wanted to do this more often or more professionally?

RS: Well no we always knew. When I say we wanted to do it professionally, we wanted to get paid for doing it. So to me that's the point in time when you become a professional, when you actually get a dollar for your work, so - -

AT: When was that point in time?

RS: Well, we - - okay we played this - - my mother - - it was wild - - my mother would buy us all these papers and stuff and she would take us wherever. I mean we played in the Bronx talent show. We played in Manhattan talent shows. We played in Brooklyn talent shows. But one day my mother took us to this Manhattan talent show. And this is where we met Ed Baldman who owned 99 Records in Soho, lower Manhattan.

AT: Do you remember where the talent show was exactly?

RS: It was in - - it was funny because later on we would rehearse in the building. They would call it the "Music Building"-- that's off of West 30th street. So I mean, when I'm in New York, I still use studios in there and stuff like that. So yeah, it was the Music Building off West 30th Street. It's definitely something else right now. But at that point it was just a rehearsal, a recording studio in the lower basement. We went in there and we were in this talent contest. You know, if you won the talent contest, you got a recording contract and stuff like that. And we went in there and - -

AT: Oh that was the advertised - - that was the prize- the contract.

RS: Yeah, yeah. So we went in there and you know. I remember, what I remember though is when I got out there was a line of kids and they had all these electronic and fancy instruments right? And oh man, I got scared and I wouldn't play. So I went over to my mother and she said like, 'What's wrong?' And I said, "Ma, I don't wanna go in.

Look at their instruments, they got fancy instruments and all we have is this stuff.'

Because again, it wasn't the greatest quality. It's what she could afford to give us and stuff. And actually at this time we had met these friends of my brother's who lived in Brooklyn. This is when we actually had 2 guys performing along with us. We didn't consider them a part of the band but they performed along with us okay. This was Tito and he had a cousin. I don't remember his cousin's name because he wasn't there that long. But of course Tito, who did play with us for a couple of years and stuff like that.

AT: What would they play? Instruments? Backup?

RS: The congas, the congas. That was it. They played the lead. Actually it was funny because they played two lead congas. It was when I had my sister Marie come in that I got her a bass conga. And again, it changed that sound, which was a good sound, but we'll get to that in a minute. What happened was, I said, 'Ma, I don't wanna do it.' And she said, 'Listen,' she said, 'I didn't bring you all the way down from Manhattan for my health.' She said, 'if you take yourself in there,' in so many words, 'I will kick you in your behind.' [laughs]

AT: Wow.

RS: Hey, my mom, you know [laughs] - -

AT: She was not playing around.

RS: No she was not playing. So I thought about it. I said, 'God, do I go over there and embarrass myself or do I come back and get kicked in my butt by my mom?' I got on line [laughs]. And we went inside and we did our thing.

AT: And you won right?

RS: Well, no we didn't win. But what it was was Ed was in there and he saw us and apparently he took down our phone number. And he called the house a little later on and he said, 'Yeah, I was one of the judges,' he said, 'Listen, you know, I think it was rigged. They were looking for - - they claimed they were looking for new sound.' He said, 'But what did they do? They pick the same old, same old, what was commercial.' He said, 'But I really liked your sound.' He said, 'We're putting together some show down in lower Manhattan at a club...' - - you know what was funny? Back in those days, every other week a new club was popping up. It wasn't really a club, they were renting a hall or whatever have you. But this is something called 'Popfront' at a place called Mechanics' Hall. Don't ask me the exact location.

AT: Mechanics' Hall.

RS: Yeah, I don't - - but this was something called 'Popfront' at a place called Mechanics' Hall. This was our first paying gig as ESG.

AT: And this was it. So you played the show. You got paid for it. And did you continue your relationship with 99 records after this?

RS: Yes.

AT: Is this where it started?

RS: Yes this is where it started. And we got paid maybe a whopping five dollars a piece, but [laughs]...man, I mean - -

AT: [laughs] It doesn't get to pay transportation.

RS: No but actually as a kid this is exciting, you know what I'm saying? Especially for a kid coming out of the projects, you know. Like wow - -

AT: Well this is also something that we touched upon in our first conversation. The kinds of places - - you're playing in lower Manhattan and the kinds of music you're playing - - I mean, what were the other bands like? What were the people like in the audience? How were you received?

RS: Okay, well, again, at this time, and especially when we played the Popfront, it was like - - boy, it was a different experience. It was a punk scene. It was kids who had dyed hair- stuff we had never seen before. The big spiked things, and we were like, 'whoa.' The leather jackets, the dark clothes - -

AT: So you're talking like the Sex Pistols, that kind of - -

RS: Exactly, exactly. I mean, today you would call it the Goth look but back then it was the punk look, and - -

AT: So would you say that you had a look?

RS: No, we were just like - - you know, it was funny. My mother would always try to make sure we had matching t-shirts [laughs]. So whatever we had, we had matching outfits.

AT: So you had a uniform then.

RS: Yeah, we did, we did [laughs].

AT: Alright, so you were conscious of that then, putting on the performance?

RS: Well my mom was. I mean we were like okay. She said 'Okay, matching t-shirts,' or 'matching sweatshirts.' Later on I started to say why. But in the beginning like, okay mom wanted us to wear this and stuff, it's cool. But I think she felt that it identified you

as a band. So okay we were cool with that. We really didn't care you know. We wanted to get out there and do all things.

AT: So you were out there playing and you saw that there were definitely differences between your act and like these punk acts. So would you say the people making up the audience, were they coming from the same place as the bands? Were these white kids, were they black, were they Latino, was it mixed?

RS: It was, okay, in some clubs it was the white rock kids. In some places it was mixed. But I would say growing up the majority of our audiences were a lot of white kids and stuff like that. And it was cool. It was all good. But again, race never mattered to me. It seems to matter more to, and I don't want to say the people interviewing me and stuff like that, but they're the ones that always bring it up.

AT: [laughs]

RS: When I go out and play, I'm playing for people, I'm not playing for colors. So I don't care what race you are. It's not about that. It's about people sharing music and hopefully, bringing us together.

AT: Right, well I hope that's what music is really about, right?

RS: Uh, huh.

AT: So you didn't experience any kind of - - you were out there playing, and you were obviously doing well because you had a lot of support and you had record contracts and money coming in - -

RS: Well, we didn't have record contracts. I mean, that's another funny misconception. What it was was again, we were working with this guy Ed Bolman, and he had a record

shop and he had a record label. I mean all stuff, again we weren't of - - we were very ignorant of the fact. But what it was was, while we were playing these clubs, again, at this time we also had another music change. We brought my sister Marie into the band and dropped off Tito's cousin. And the reason being - - this is funny, this is actually my first thing with guys giving me trouble [laughs].

AT: Oh really?

RS: Again, it was my band, I ran the band, okay? And he says to me, he says, 'But you can't tell me what to do, only my father can tell me what to do.' I go, 'Whoa. I'm paying you not your father.' So he says, 'Well, you know...' So I went and I remember I spoke to his father and I said, 'Listen,' I said, 'Your son told me I can't tell him what to do yet I'm, you know, paying him, right?' I said, 'So, he has to go.' Now his father was very angry because his father enjoyed going to shows and he enjoyed the spotlight, the free drink tickets, all the V.I.P. treatment he got because his kid was playing and now he was being dropped. And it was a matter of - - listen the guy, he wasn't giving me any respect, he wasn't following the rules and - -

AT: This is the thing though. Do you think that that was just his personality or maybe there was a clash there? Or do you think there was something else going on, that maybe since it's a women whose fronting the band and who's in charge and - -

RS: Yeah, I definitely - - listen, then I knew it was a cultural thing because these gentlemen are Hispanic, okay. And it wasn't happening and in his household his father was the boss and that's the way it was. And the woman wasn't gonna tell me - - [laughs]I mean he told me this pretty much in plain English, okay. So I was like 'fine,' and that's

why I went to his father respectfully and told him that I can't - - but he was like, 'But I can do that and I can...' and I told him like you know, 'No sir, you can't stay at every rehearsal with us. We're a band and we should be able to function without parents sitting in there with us.' You know, again, naturally my mother always went with us because my sister was underage at that time and - -

AT: Oh, so she was underage. So how old did you have to be to play at a lot of these clubs?

RS: Well you definitely had to be - - well you had to be over 18 or 21, but some of them were younger than 18. But because they were selling liquor, that was the problem. So my mother would actually have to keep my younger sister and Tito back stage because they were young. They were like 16.

AT: Oh, wow.

RS: So she had to keep them back stage or be pretty much their chaperone back stage and sit with them until we went on stage, until we performed on stage and then they were back off the stage and back in the dressing room.

AT: Right, right. That's interesting, so she was chaperoning back there.

RS: Yeah so. We played the punk clubs, we clubs, oh god, we played the Mud Club, we played Tiara Three, we played Hoorah, we played Irving Plaza, we played - - if there was a club opening in Manhattan we were playing it [laughs].

AT: Right, so you played a lot of places that - - can you think of any places maybe that are still - - some that might still be existing that - -

RS: Well Irving Plaza should still be happening. Well, okay, we played the Peppermint Lounge, we played Danceteria, we played, oh goodness, Barnes International. I mean again, clubs that, whatever have you. We played the Paradise Garage, we played, I mean --

AT: These were, these were, at least the nights that you were playing, they were almost exclusively punk clubs?

RS: Not the Paradise Garage. The Paradise Garage was an underground dance club, okay?

AT: An underground dance club?

RS: Yes it was. And again some clubs, like for instance the Mud Club. The Mud Club was a mixture of a dance club, punk club. On any given night you might have a band playing, you might have a rap act playing, okay. So the Mud Club to me, I found was really innovative.

AT: Well that's really, it sounds like -- I mean, you really did a lot of playing in different kinds of places and moving between scenes, so you did see rapping and emceeing and you also played alongside like heavy punk bands.

RS: Yes we did.

AT: And you know from what I know about your sound, beyond being percussive heavy, there's a lot of dance in there too. I mean there's real -- you know, the funk rhythms and almost disco sound to some of that. So when you guys took the stage how did people react? Did they dance to your music?

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RS: Well first they would look at you because it was pretty much all ladies up front. And we had one guy and it was like 'oh wow, it's girls,' [laughs] you know, and whatever have you. So they would react for that at first and stuff and then you know, you started playing and they would listen and they liked what you did. And we started to pick up a following. And it was funny because they pretty much would follow you from club to club to club to club. So it was all cool.

AT: Yeah, it sounds just great. Especially, just being a part of that scene at that age is really a great thing. And there's a lot - - I think at that period there's probably a lot happening, and you know, things that never really happened before. It was kind of a new scene.

RS: Right, it was. At this particular time, what I loved about that scene, it was a time where all kinds of artists could go out. I mean on any given night we would be on a bill with a rap act, a punk act, we played with people such as The Clash, P.I.L., Public Image, and Grandmaster Flash.

AT: You played with Grandmaster Flash also? How about that.

RS: Yeah [laughs]. That, oh god, was at the Barnes International Show. That was crazy. But I mean, I could look back through my scrap book and look at the different bands we played with. We opened for Wilson Pickett who just passed away.

AT: Wow, how about that. So you were really diverse as far as how you would organize your shows.

RS: Well we didn't - - I mean again, it was at the time, Ed, and he was managing us or so called managing us. And I mean again different you know, different things. I mean

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you know, hey. And still, I would say this today. Hey, if it's a show and you're willing to put us in there, we'll play. We'll give you the best possible show we can give you.

AT: Yeah, yeah. And I'm sure you did actually. Maybe this is a good time to bring up the sampling that happened with ESG. Obviously songs like U.F.O. became the [inaudible] for so many hip hop songs.

RS: Well, okay, again, talking about this now - - well we're playing - - I'll tell you how we got our first record contracts, okay. Well it wasn't really a record contract but how we got our first deal-let me rephrase that, okay. What happened is, we're playing at this club and we're opening for this band called Certain Ratio who comes from London. And this guy named Tony Wilson who owns Factory Records in London, you know he hears us and he comes up, after we did our sound check and he says to me, he says, 'How would you like to make a record?' And I'm like 'Okay.' You know, I didn't take him serious. This was on a Wednesday, and Saturday we were in studio.

AT: Okay. That Saturday?

RS: Yeah.

AT: He works fast.

RS: Yeah, well again, he's a very well-known guy, Tony Wilson. They made a movie about him and his producer Martin Hannett called "24 Hour Party People."

AT: Oh, okay. I didn't make that connection.

RS: Yeah that's Tony Wilson of Factory Records. But he says to me - - you know, because I don't know if you saw that film and so it kind of gives how impulsive they were and stuff like that, and that's for real. I mean out of the film...that is real. I mean

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some of the other stuff wasn't true about them that I knew, but this was only, I didn't know them that well, but my experience with them. But we were in the studio and we went in there with Martin Hannett and we did our thing and we made the record. Now what was funny was Ed saw that this was gonna happen so he made sure he was gonna profit off of it. So we did the thing. And again, doing all this with no contracts, no signatures, no nothing. This - - kids wanted to make a record and again I call it stupidity at this time [laughs].

AT: So you never really had someone around to tell you or to kind of teach you about the business and to walk you through these steps.

RS: No, not until later on in life. So again, I was glad that there were no contracts, that there was no paper work. Because later on when I went about getting my stuff back and owning my rights, and owning my copyrights, it took me a while, but I was able to get it.

AT: That's great. That's really nice to hear that you were. But there's probably still a lot of stuff that might be floating around with you know this is your band and it's on someone's album. Does that ever happen? Do you hear something - -

RS: Sure and again, I go after it. Okay the first thing was to get out there so once you're out there, you know. Now it was funny, the first time I ever heard a sample of U.F.O., I remember we were at this club. And before - - you know, after sound check sometimes they would show like something they were gonna do. Because also in the clubs at that time, they would do art things. Somebody would come out and maybe paint themselves [laughs], wild things. I'm serious, they would come out in the club. But what happened was somebody had did I guess this little documentary piece. And the piece was on Africa

Bambattaa. And rolling on the film I hear U.F.O. So I figure you know, I'm just gonna hear U.F.O. I said, 'Oh man, cool, they used U.F.O. on the film.' When all of a sudden, he starts rapping over it. And I was like - -

AT: [inaudible]

RS: Exactly. That was - -

AT: That must have blown your mind.

RS: Oh, well, yeah. At that point, Ed, my so called manager got some colorful phrases coming from my mouth. Because again, I couldn't believe this. And I said, 'How could you let him do that did you...' 'I had nothing to do with this. I don't know. I'm just as shocked as you are.' Well, I don't know. Until this day, I still don't know. But, that was the first time I ever heard a sample. And I was like, 'What is this.' I said, 'How could they take our music like that.' I said, 'That's ours, that's our.' In so many words, that's mine.

AT: Right. So this was Afrika Bambaataa or this was part of a documentary, like the film that was made?

RS: Yeah.

AT: Alright.

RS: And I remember him telling me, 'Oh don't worry about it. Don't worry about it. It's not a record it's just you know...he's just free-styling in the street,' because that's what they were showing them- how they free-styled at block parties and things like that. 'Don't worry it ain't real, it ain't real.' And I'm like, 'Yeah it is,' you know? I'm seeing this. And other people are gonna see this and stuff like that and I don't want them to get a

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mis-connection. So that is something that, like I said, the first time I saw it I was upset about it, and even today I still get upset about it. But the difference is now, I work out a business deal with the various people and generally there's some compensation.

AT: Right. This is something I can see that you're very careful about. The way also that you scrutinized our own policy here so, I can see that. So that's really - - that's good though, that that kind of thing is very, you know, more under control nowadays I think. But maybe back then there wasn't this much awareness. In new music - -

RS: Well what there was was they didn't make laws until later on. At first, and see, again, what I remember about it I would tell people who were playing. They would go like - - see they weren't worried about it until they started sampling the bigger artists. We, at the time, were little artists, independent label, or whatever have you, who gave a crap. That's the way I looked at it right? But when they started to sample major artists and it started hurting the major labels, that's when they went and started arguing, fighting, creating sample laws, you know?

AT: Right. That's the way I think it happens with a lot of music. I mean you can even see that with downloading music today, that kind of thing.

RS: Oh yeah, yeah.

AT: Well that's really, that's one of those things that I think a lot of people are aware of. And it's interesting to hear your take on it. So at this point you're playing clubs - - when did you actually - - when was the first time you realized that you had an international audience? Was this after you recorded - - was it early on? You know you have this recording with the British studio, so - -

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RS: Right, right. This happened pretty much in 1980. And when we released the record, or rather when they released the record in London, because it was a split release in London and in New York. And they released it, and it was climbing up the charts. It was 'Good' and 'Moody.'

AT: 'Moody' was the other one?

RS: Mmm, hmm. And it was climbing up the charts. And it was funny because the three records we did record were 'Good,' 'Moody,' and 'U.F.O.' And how U.F.O. got recorded was Martin Hannett says to me, 'Hey, I got three minutes left on the record, do you have a three minute song?' And I said 'Sure I do.'

AT: Oh, really? Was that something that you had worked out? Was it a song you had kind of been working on but it wasn't - -

RS: No, what it was back then is you know, we made songs short and to the point [laughs].

AT: I know, I have some awareness. I actually played in a punk band for a while, so. I know how that - - so a three minute song was the standard?

RS: I don't know. You know, it was very funny too. I don't think when you're playing that you really time. Because sometimes you play but you're jamming, or what we would say, 'extend that thing.' Because it's how we got the extending songs longer I guess than three minutes - - when you have sets and they go, 'Well tonight we like...' - - okay I remember when we were first singing, maybe it was because we were opening that 10 minute set. Like, 'okay we can pull off a ten minute set.' Then as it went up and maybe it got a little more pay they'd go, 'okay we want you to do a 20 minute set.' And you go,

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‘Uh oh’ [laughs]. So this led to jams [laughs]. Like, ‘oh man, how can we extend this record.’ Or of course, writing more records, but it also led to jams of your popular records.

AT: Alright yeah. So a lot of this - - what you’re saying is that U.F.O. came out of a jam?

RS: No, U.F.O. didn’t come out of a jam. U.F.O. came out of-- I was watching “Close Encounters of the Third Kind” and ‘Star Wars,’ - -

AT: [laughs]

RS: This is serious. And you know I got home one night and I go ‘Man, this is my interpretation of what it would be if a U.F.O. landed in the middle of the projects’ [laughs].

AT: Right, right. That’s great. So that’s ‘Star Wars’ and ‘Close Encounters’ were the - -

RS: Yeah, definitely inspired me to do the U.F.O. thing.

AT: Alright, I think Star Wars has probably inspired a lot of people to do a lot of things [laughs] but that’s very - -

RS: Well especially the ‘Close Encounters’ because, I don’t know if you’ve ever seen the movie - -

AT: Oh, yeah.

RS: But at the end you know the aliens are communicating with the people through music.

AT: Right, right.

RS: So I was like, 'Oh man.' I thought that was so cool. So I had to go home and 'hey what would happen if...' [laughs].

AT: Yeah. And I think you must have hit a chord there because it's no coincidence that this ended up being one of your most famous songs and a sampled song.

[END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A] [BEGINNING OF TAPE 1 SIDE B]

AT: Okay, can you just tell me a very basic question? Why do you play music and what has been the most satisfying part for you up until this point?

RS: Well, when we first started playing music, like I said, we played it because my mother wanted to keep us off the streets. But we enjoyed playing music. My sister Valerie and I enjoyed writing songs. We enjoyed that we could bring our other sisters in and, you know, for them to play the music that we wrote for them and stuff like that. So we enjoyed what we were doing. It was a family experience and a bonding experience. Even until this day - - okay there were a couple of personnel changes. In 1985, well actually in '84, we dropped my sister Deborah. In '85 we brought in 2 guys from the Bronx, also. They were Leroy Glover and David Miles. Playing bass guitar and electric guitar. And we kept them until about 1991.

AT: 1991?

RS: Yeah. Then in 1995 we brought in our daughters. And my daughter Nicole plays the bass and now my niece, Shastell plays the electric guitar. So this to me has been the most fulfilling ESG because we're back to family bonding. And it's like, when my sister Valerie and I were playing, you know, quite obviously in the early 80's, we were pregnant with our daughters. We played pregnant, you know? We kept on playing

because it's what we did. And it's like coming full circle. They were there on the stage indirectly [laughs]. And now they're actually physically on the stage so we think this is so cool.

AT: That's amazing that you just played all the way through.

RS: Yeah, well [laughs].

AT: And it's really cool I think that you actually now are playing with your daughters in the band, to see that transition, that you're passing the music on to another generation and that you're sharing that.

RS: Yeah.

AT: So you say it's always kind of been really about family and your friends and the people that were close to you?

RS: Right, right. And again, my daughter and me, they were also Bronx- born residents [laughs].

AT: Right.

RS: So just like I said, to pass on this and to play with them is such a bonding experience and we're having such fun. So it's no longer them hearing our stories but actually being a part of the story.

AT: Right, right. So you're re-creating the experience for another generation.

RS: Right. And also, the cool thing is we're doing a lot of international playing. So we play places like London, Spain, France, Norway, god...I'm trying to think of all the places...Sweden. So we're doing all this international playing and stuff like that so they get to travel the world. And what I used to tell them, I said, 'We travel the world on our

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songs.' So now they're getting to see the same experience and getting to travel the world on their mother's song. So that's the cool thing. And again, this music which - - and that I will truly say- this music was inspired from where we lived in the Bronx. One of the things that I felt was inspiring about the music was - - and again, we wanted to get out of the Bronx. I don't want to say this in a horrible sense. But it's helped us to live our dream. You have a dream, you want to get out of a situation and stuff like that. Because like I said, I did not enjoy the projects. But again, whatever drives you, okay? And stuff like that. But again, I also felt we ere inspired by the sounds of the streets and the things that were going on. I always thought the things that were going on - - I remember, and this is not funny, I wrote a song called 'Standing in Line-- Standing in Line in Motor Vehicles.' It was like as - - I don't know if you've ever been in the line in motor vehicles - - things have changed since when I was younger and stuff like that. But standing in line it was like as I was standing there, the way people were shuffling, I actually heard this music in my mind and wrote that whole song 'Standing in Line in Motor Vehicles' [laughs].

AT: Yeah. You know, that's inspiring in a different kind of way right [laughs]? A negative way maybe - -

RS: [laughs] No, but it was a great song and it did well.

AT: Yeah, yeah. So your environment was a huge factor in who you became and where you traveled, and where you went?

RS: Right.

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AT: Yeah. So that's interesting to hear. So do you have any final, maybe words of advice for young musicians. Maybe female women musicians out there?

RS: Well yeah. I mean one of the things is, first of all, if you really believe in yourself, believe in yourself. But one of the things I also want to say is educate your self. Educate yourself and realize that the music business is exactly what it say, 'music business.'

Where, sure you might be sure fire and ready to go on your talent, that's all cool. But you need to know what's going on here business wise. You can't always trust your managers and you can't always trust your labels. You need to educate yourself as artists on the business of music business. And that I would say is something you really need to know. You need to know about your publishing. You need to know about your songs you write. You need to educate yourself on the music business. So that would be my word of advice to anybody who's really really considering getting into the business.

AT: Okay, that sounds great. That sounds like perfect advice. And obviously it's something that you've made a career out of and you have been involved in the business, and it is a business for you, right?

RS: Yes, 30 years [laughs].

AT: So I'm actually going to stop the tape here in a second. But do you have anything else you'd like to add about your experience, about the Bronx, about playing music, about anything?

RS: Okay well, god. Let's see. Offhand, not that I could think of. Like I said I shared the fact that to put ESG in a nutshell, this was something brought about by the love of my mother who didn't want her daughters to end up in a bad situation. And also now, as

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mothers, we have passed the love of what we, my sister Valerie and I, were taught at creating on to our daughters and working with them. So it's, ESG is love of family and trying to do the best you can with your god- given natural talents.

AT: And you could really go far with that.

RS: Yes, of course. And believing in your self and like I said, learning the hard way that you better learn the business [laughs].

AT: Definitely.

[END OF INTERVIEW]